

# Train for the Fight

by Captain Todd J. Clark



*This article depicts lessons learned from the experiences of the officers, noncommissioned officers, and troopers of L Troop, 3d Squadron, 2d Armored Cavalry Regiment, both prior to and during the war in Iraq. L Troop did not have the luxury of a “training” period prior to the war. The troop was identified for deployment as a separate unit in September 2002 and arrived in Kuwait on 1 October 2002, where we immediately began conducting route and area security missions.*

*With the onset of the war (and the maintenance company ambush in An Nasiriyah), we transitioned to securing the main supply route in Iraq under the command of the 504th Military Police Battalion. Subsequently, we were reattached to 2d Armored Cavalry Regiment as a subordinate unit of 3d Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment, 3d Infantry Division (3ID). While attached to 3ID, we conducted combat operations, stability operations, and support operations in southeast Baghdad.*

*This article addresses missions conducted prior to the war in Kuwait and discusses things we could have done to prepare for operations in Iraq. In my role as the commander of L Troop, the major payoff during operations in Iraq was building confidence in my unit and equipment.*

“Shoot, move, and communicate” is the way to win the fight. There are many things that soldiers must do to win a fight, but it is very easy to overlook the basics. We spend a lot of time concentrating on traditional training tasks; however, we fail to dedicate adequate attention and resources to the fundamental precursors to success — physical readiness, small-unit maneuver, and weapons proficiency.

## Physical Readiness

Typical physical training regimens consist of the “daily dozen,” and for the most part, are oriented toward high Army physical fitness training (APFT) scores. However, APFT tasks do not accurately reflect the demands of a combat soldier. Soldiers must be strong, tough, and confident in their abilities. Battle focus must be integrated into the physical readiness (as opposed to physical training) program.

During combat, soldiers are expected to perform intense activities while wearing combat equipment. As such, it is necessary to do the proverbial “train as we fight.” While battle dress uniforms (BDUs) and combat boots are not ideal athletic gear, it's what we wear to the fight.

To train as we fight, we began conducting weekly battle-focused physical training, in which we wore our BDUs and boots. Soldiers were given the discretion to include load-bearing equipment, body armor, and other necessary equipment. The commander's intent was to hurdle obstacles, crawl beneath objects, ascend and descend obstacles, and jump from objects. The goal was to develop stamina while simultaneously familiarizing the body with impact and conditioning the soldier's agility. Distance running must be kept to a minimum; however, soldiers must be briskly moving for the duration of the event. For example, a squad-sized element conducts exercises in the squadron area. The squad leader leads his element under picnic tables, over fences, and mounts and follows small walls. Directional changes, combined with executing basic obstacles, develop agility, balance, and endurance.

In hindsight, more attention should have been devoted to developing muscular strength. Each soldier must be capable of using unarmed nonlethal or lethal force against a larger opponent. While technique is obviously critical, and will be discussed later, there is a definite need for strong fighters. Integrating a weight-training program into the training schedule is a great way to program gym sessions and dedicate time to improving. We must consider this training as an important facet of daily operations, and not just focus on the 0630 to 0730 hour physical training time. During post-deployment, we scheduled weight-training sessions in the afternoons several days per week. In addition to weight training, using pull-ups/dips assists in developing upper-body strength.

Strength is virtually useless without a means of delivery. Integrating combatives, grappling, takedowns, and boxing will instill the discipline and technique required for successful unarmed contact. Soldiers must be as capable in handling confrontations without weapons as they are with weapons. Soldiers must be prepared and willing to detain unruly persons or eliminate threats.

In the aforementioned physical readiness program, we must be conscious of risks involved. There is a clear potential for increased injuries. However, we must not let the risk prevent the training. Bumps and bruises obtained during training will make us tougher, and teach us methods to prevent bumps and bruises during combat.

### Small-Unit Proficiency

Sergeants and staff sergeants normally serve as senior leaders during operations in Baghdad. As such, it is imperative that we not only ensure they are technically and tactically proficient, but that they are empowered. Strong junior leaders develop strong subordinates, which develop strong teams. We cannot assume that our subordinate leaders will develop adequately through their participation in higher command level exercises, such as external evaluations and simulated networking. Adequate time and resources must be dedicated at the small-unit level. In Iraq, no fight in which our troops were involved was ever won at the troop level.

Squads and sections must become synchronized, which demands frequent training in challenging situations. Replicate high levels of stress, to include hunger, sleep deprivation, and harsh environmental conditions. As squads conduct training together, their team solidifies. They learn each other's strengths and weaknesses, which they come to anticipate. As proficiency increases, confidence inevitably increases.

Small units must continually train together, and direct a significant focus to cross training. While conducting combat operations, there is minimal time to think about or analyze the situation; reactions must be well developed through tough, realistic, and frequent training. Basically, this exemplifies the entire "train as we fight" concept. A great mentor once explained, "you cannot make a fist without five fingers, and those fingers must all close at the same time to make a fist. You don't even think about making a fist, it's a reaction — small teams must learn to react as a fist."

Our squads and sections must be experts at land navigation (with or without global positioning systems), using tactical maneuver, battle drills, and actions on contact. As these tasks are trained, we must also ensure that individuals are cross-trained, to include preparing junior soldiers to assume leader positions in the event there are casualties. Furthermore, each team member should be capable of assuming at least one other team mem-

ber's duties, to include radio telephone operators, machine gunners, and drivers.

The great thing is that this "basic skills" training requires virtually no resources, with the exception of time for noncommissioned officers to conduct it — most can be done in a small open field, parking lot, or picnic table. Constant emphasis must be made to ensure that training opportunities are seized. There are countless hours wasted with soldiers standing around waiting for something to happen — junior leaders must step forward and take charge. A junior leader cannot wait for his platoon sergeant to give him a mission.

Training must also be focused on decisionmaking and taking initiative in a stressful environment. We must develop strong small units with leaders (and soldiers) who can think fast, decide, and execute. Many times, guidance is simply not available, or there is absolutely no time to request it.

Inevitably, confidence in equipment is essential to small-unit proficiency. We must be allowed to push our equipment to its limits during training so that we know what can and cannot be done in combat. For example, we must know that our high mo-



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*"As with other equipment, we must be confident in the capabilities of our weapons and aware of their limitations. Using many positions, such as prone, kneeling, off-hand, or even unconventional hasty positions, modes of fires, and varied ranges will allow soldiers to develop confidence. Also, using different target materials, such as wood, concrete walls, sandbags, and glass will allow soldiers to understand ammunition capabilities and limitations against materials that they may have to shoot through during combat."*

bility, multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs) can cross a median without getting high-centered, or that they can fit down an alley in pursuit of gunmen. Just as we must push ourselves to our limits in training, we must do the same with our equipment.

Great training activities may include squad simulated training lanes, leader's reaction course, or squad land navigation course. The key is to conduct demanding battle-focused training together. Developing this confident team will ensure they function properly "where the metal meets the meat."

### Weapons Proficiency

Weapons proficiency is more important than weapons qualification. For many in today's Army, personal weapons qualification is the endstate for marksmanship training. Qualification is simply a gate, from which units can begin to train. Very rarely will a well-rested soldier conduct an engagement from a comfortable prepared fighting position.

We must integrate many variables into weapons training. Most engagements in Iraq occur during patrols. As such, we must become proficient in firing weapons from vehicles, while moving, and from various types of cover and concealment positions. Furthermore, introducing fatigue, discomfort, or stress during training will replicate the battlefield. Once again, safety is a pertinent concern, but should not prevent tough, realistic training.

Many people have remarked that soldiers are "scared" of their weapons. Sacred is probably an inaccurate description; however, a few are intimidated by carrying loaded weapons because it is something out of the ordinary. Soldiers simply must have more exposure to working with a loaded weapon. While the best case would be for us to carry live ammunition for every training event, this is obviously not possible. However, including blank ammunition in any training event where personal weapons are used is completely valid.

A perpetual issue with using weapons and live ammunition is incorrectly termed "accidental discharge." "Negligent discharge," a far more appropriate term, results from either a lack of training and/or lack of attention. By continually training with loaded

weapons, our soldiers will become more attuned to their weapon's carry status.

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Once again, personnel should be cross-trained on various weapons systems. Each member in a command should be able to correctly operate any weapons system that he may have to use in combat. This may also include orientation to threat weapons that may be used in a contingency or as a capabilities and limitations display.

The graduate level for readiness is merging these areas together. Each area is independently important, and a great means to achieve strong small units. However, integrating each into operations is the true catalyst for success. Under fire, a squad will need to shoot, move, and communicate to complete the mission. We must give our small units the assets they need to be competent and confident.



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